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ABSTRACT

The influence of discourse and pragmatic transfer in cross-cultural encounters has received little consideration in studies on the construct validity of performance tests. With the current emphasis on direct assessment of speaking proficiency following the protocol of the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), the potential importance of cross-cultural pragmatics is evident. The study reported here explores cross-cultural phenomena in the OPI by comparing the accommodative discourse of six English-as-a-Second-Language interviews matched according to rating outcomes with six Japanese-as-a-Second-Language interviews. Tallies of features of accommodation and control from the 12 interviews are compared to show a clear tendency on the part of the Japanese language interviewer to avoid interactional trouble and communication breakdown by providing highly accommodative questioning and topic-maintaining interviewer turns. Results suggest that comparable ratings, based exclusively on the speech of the interviewee, may not be equivalent in terms of the discourse and accommodation used by the interviewers, and that interviewer strategies for avoiding trouble may be linked to underlying cultural and pragmatic phenomena. (Author/MSE)

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**Abstract**

The influence of discourse and pragmatic transfer in cross-cultural encounters has received little consideration in studies on the construct validity of performance tests. With the current emphasis on direct assessment of speaking proficiency following the protocol of the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), the potential importance of cross-cultural pragmatics is evident. This study explores cross-cultural phenomena in the OPI by comparing the accommodative discourse of six English as a second language interviews matched according to rating outcomes with six Japanese as a second language interviews. Tallies of features of accommodation and control from the twelve interviews are compared to show a clear tendency on the part of the Japanese as second language interviewer to avoid interactional trouble and communication breakdown by providing highly accommodative questioning and topic-maintaining interviewer turns. The study suggests that comparable ratings, based exclusively on the speech of the interviewee, may not be equivalent in terms of the discourse and accommodation utilized by the interviewers, and that interviewer strategies for avoiding trouble may be linked to underlying cultural and pragmatic phenomena.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural Pragmatics

# Cross-cultural Pragmatics in Oral Proficiency Interview Strategies

## I Introduction

Tests of second language proficiency can be enormously consequential to second language learners. Because such tests are routinely used to open, restrict or deny educational or employment opportunities, test developers are obliged to construct their instruments within established norms of validity and reliability in order to limit the effects of *arbitrary assessment*. No one sets out to create an arbitrary instrument or assessment procedure, although it is clear that as our understanding of the construct of proficiency changes over time and we acquire fresh perceptions about the ecology of proficiency testing, it becomes increasingly important, perhaps even ethically compelling, to consider approaches to aligning the instrument or procedure with the new knowledge.

This is precisely the position oral proficiency assessment in general now assumes with respect to the body of research developed during the past two decades into face-to-face cross-cultural exchanges in gatekeeping contexts (Ericson, 1976, 1979; Fiksdal, 1988, 1990; Marlaire and Maynard, 1992; Scollon and Scollon, 1981), especially those intended to support oral proficiency ratings (Ross and Berwick, 1992; van Lier, 1989) entailing an interviewer's use of accommodation and control strategies (i.e., broadly, *foreigner talk*; Ferguson, 1971, 1975; Freed, 1978). The

orientation to examination of oral proficiency as a rule-governed cross-cultural encounter has received little attention within the traditional psychometric framework of the oral proficiency movement (see Bachman, 1988; Valdman, 1988), nor has the status of oral proficiency interviews as instances of extended, asymmetric discourse (van Lier, 1989; Young and Milanovic, 1992) been expanded to scrutinize cross-cultural effects on the texts interviewers and interviewees construct in test settings.

This paper builds upon a relatively small body of work that has examined potential threats to the validity of the Oral Proficiency Interview[1] based on the use of arbitrarily constructed rating scales (Lantolf and Frawley, 1985, 1988; also Bachman, 1988; Bachman and Savignon, 1986; Clark and Clifford, 1988; *cf*. Dandonoli and Henning, 1990) and, more recently, upon the frequently naive (from the interviewer's point of view) use of accommodation and control during the interview procedure (Ross and Berwick, 1992), particularly in interviewer strategies for framing interview questions (Ross, 1992).

Although the OPI gains much of its reliability (Lowe, 1987) from the fact that it is organized around an interview protocol, and claims both face and content validity from its appearance as a series of conversational exchanges around a variety of interviewer-induced probes (Educational Testing Service, 1982), it is ironically the conversational qualities

of the procedure which we have found comprise the most serious challenge to the ecological validity of interviewers' ratings and perhaps also to the validity of the construct of proficiency. Our initial study examined the relationship between various features of accommodation interviewers employed during the OPI--including requests for clarification, propositional reformulation and grammatical simplification that normally form the core of contingent, non-test conversational management between native speakers and nonnative speakers--and the award of ratings associated with global oral proficiency descriptions on the 11-point (0 to 5, including plus points) ACTFL/ETS scale. Findings suggested the tendency of interviewers to over-accommodate at the lower to intermediate levels and to effectively tutor production of the 20-minute speech sample. Under these circumstances, truly conversational performance which normally leaves participants unaware of their accommodative behavior would seem to be a dysfunctional element of a procedure expressly intended at the outset of the interview to guide interviewees into displaying the limits of their knowledge of the language of the interview.

We also speculated about the effects of interviewers' interest in controlling topical development specifically and exercising control over the interview structure generally through such features of control as topic nomination, topic abandonment, propositional reformulation and expansion of an

interviewee's utterances. Here we noted the possibility that the ambivalence created when *both* conversational and interview values are instantiated into the speech setting might affect the ways in which the interviewee interprets and responds to the interviewer. To the extent that one's culture provides patterns for interpretation and responsiveness during face-to-face encounters of the sort encompassed by the OPI, it is also possible to speculate that ratings of exchanges between interviewers and interviewees from various cultures will profoundly and perhaps unwittingly reflect the orientations to talk participants bring to the interview context (Labov, 1972; Gumperz, 1978; 1982a, 1982b). To put the point more explicitly into the framework of oral assessment, interviewer-raters may be unaware of the constraints their own cultural background imposes on the sample of speech produced by interviewees who function within a different framework for what constitutes responsive speech in interview or test settings--or for appropriate verbal behavior in tasks imposed during the period of assessment. Given the largely universal, effectively culture-neutral stance of the interview procedure and rating guidelines, that is, the implied logic that a particular rating awarded to different interviewees from different cultural backgrounds on different occasions describes the same level of proficiency in the language of the interview, evidence of cultural variability would pose questions about the validity of the procedure across cultures.

How are we to treat ratings based on very different perceptions of what interviewees must produce in order to provide evidence of their oral proficiency?

Ratings accomplished within a standard protocol and with reference to established guidelines appear to afford protection from arbitrary assessment at the relatively formal procedural level. At the discourse level, however, research has shown significant variability of native-non-native talk in both non-test and test settings in response to a variety of features of the speech setting, including task (Berwick, 1988; Douglas and Selinker, 1985; Long, 1980; Porter, 1983; Tarone, 1985, 1988; Young and Milanovic, 1992) and gender (Young and Milanovic, 1992; see also Gass and Varonis, 1986 re: non-native/non-native exchanges). Although the responsiveness of OPI discourse to cultural background and its unintended effects on ratings have been more suggested than examined systematically, studies of interethnic communicative systems and cross-cultural pragmatics within the context of native-non-native dyadic exchanges in a variety of non-test settings strongly implicate a role for culture in determining how interviewers and interviewees build their talk, exchange and clarify information and accomplish their goals.

Along these lines, Brown and Levinson (1978) and Scollon and Scollon (1981), for example, have examined the potential of interethnic communication to produce miscommunication in terms of misfit between *politeness systems* which are deployed

in order to assert or maintain face. Interactants' perceptions of the power and distance relationships within the setting trigger use of a natural (i.e., 'appropriate') system from the user's perspective. Reciprocity between systems is possible at the outset of interaction (the systems are "symmetric"): system elements may be shared and individuals may have more than one system at their disposal for different settings or for the demands of interaction within a setting. Failure to achieve reciprocity (the systems are "asymmetric"), however, is not so much a failure to negotiate a common interpretation of meanings within the discourse as it is the inability to satisfy a partner's expectations about the treatment of face or even to perceive that these expectations have not been met. From this point of view, then, the communicative systems in play during a gatekeeping interview extend, as Scollon and Scollon (1981) note, well beyond the set of objective procedures normally developed to eliminate overt discrimination (p. 4) or to ensure reliability of assessment. They provide the literally unremarkable structures through which interviewers and interviewees engage in purposeful talk and draw unarticulated inferences about each other's capacity to conduct social life.

These 'unarticulated inferences' are central to the position developed thus far with respect to the influence of communicative systems and discourse frames (such as tasks) on talk produced during the OPI. Some of the effects of cross-

cultural variation that may bear upon the OPI have also been pointed out in studies of cross-cultural pragmatics, specifically those dealing with what Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989; also Brown and Levinson (1978) describe as face-threatening speech acts such as requests and apologies conducted within interactants' cultural frameworks for the exercise of power and perception of social distance. The relevance of dominance, in particular, to the conduct of oral proficiency interviews also forms a key element of Young and Milanovic's (1992) analysis of native-non-native interview discourse which they cast in terms of the *contingent*, specifically, *reactive*, utterances made in response to the content or perhaps form of a prior utterance. Their empirical study found significant interviewee reactivity to interviewer control over topics and goal orientation, that is, evidence for "assymmetical contingency" (also, Jones and Gerard, 1967).

What emerges from examining the various approaches to study of the cross-cultural dimensions of communicative style, whether at the level of communicative system, contingent discourse or speech act, is a focus on power and distance relations, and the ways in which participants attempt to maintain and develop an image of themselves through discourse.

Extending this convergence of viewpoint, we turn now to a comparative case study of accommodation and control exercised cross-culturally and attempt to outline several fundamental differences in the way OPI ratings at a nominally equivalent

level are worked out by two interviewers from different cultures. We first compare the interviewers' management of the assessment procedure through several non-parametric tests of the null hypothesis that there are no differences in the ways the interviewers accommodate to their interviewees and control the interview. We then move to a microanalysis of discourse which depicts the use of these strategies in context.

The use of statistical analysis to compare the two cases and then to suggest points in the discourse that distinguish them is not intended to advance general claims about the ways interviewers from different cultures achieve ratings. To the contrary, we are interested in initiating, first, an approach to the study of cross-cultural pragmatic behavior during oral proficiency interviews and, second, developing a set of empirically-based speculations about face-to-face interviews conducted by Japanese- and English-speaking interviewers that may prove useful to others in generating research hypotheses.

## II Approach

### *Raters and ratings*

The possible influence of cross-cultural phenomena on the oral proficiency interviewer is most validly examined directly in the context of the interview itself. To this end, six English as a second language (ESL) and six Japanese as a second language (JSL) OPIs were matched for the purpose of

comparing two interviewers' approaches to accommodating towards their interviewees and controlling the development of the interview. Each of the six interviews for each target language was administered by the same interviewer.

The ESL interviews were conducted by an American male initially trained and certified by Educational Training Service staff and retrained by an ETS-certified rater at a large Japanese company which conducts numerous English language courses for its employees. The OPI is routinely used at the company as an adjunct to placement and end-of-course examinations. Rated audio cassette tapes of English language OPIs were archived at the company and form the pool from which the Japanese tapes used in this study were drawn. Interviewees were all company employees taking the OPI as an end-of-course examination.

The JSL interviews were conducted by a Japanese male trained with others by an ETS-certified rater as part of a study of Japanese language proficiency gain during a three-month period of residence in Japan for grade 11 and 12 students of Japanese at secondary schools in British Columbia. Rated audio cassette tapes for the present study were selected from the archived Japanese OPI tapes produced during the gain study.

The proficiency level samples used for the matching included five 1+ (high intermediate) and one 2 (advanced) interviews recorded on cassette tape. Each interview was

transcribed and analyzed by two researchers independently following the features of interview accommodation and control outlined in Ross and Berwick, 1992 (also Appendix A, below). The average number of tallied features per interview was used as the basis for comparing the two sets of interviews in the analyses[2].

Given the small number of matched interviews considered for analysis, the difference between the JSL and ESL interviews were tested with non-parametric procedures. We employed the Mann-Whitney U Test to examine the hypothesis that the observed differences in the frequencies of the features of accommodation and control were a matter of random chance. The criterion for significance was set at .01 in order to protect against Type I error.

**III Findings**

*Categorical comparisons*

*Accommodation*

Table 1 lists the features of accommodation that differentiate the JSL and ESL interview phenomena. Although the JSL interviewer used all ten of the accommodative moves more frequently than did the ESL interviewer, three met our criterion probability of .01: display questions, over-articulation and lexical simplification. A strong trend towards grammatical simplification also distinguished the

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**Insert Table 1 here**

---

Japanese from the English language interviews. Overall, the Japanese interviewer employed accommodation more frequently both pre-emptively (within turns) and responsively (across turns) during the course of the six interviews.

*Control*

In previous research on the role of interviewer efforts to control the focus and content of the oral interview we found that the major control strategies do not appear to be related to subsequent rating outcomes (Ross and Berwick, 1992). The potential for systematic cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences *between* interviewers in the use and extent of control is nevertheless a possibility worth exploring. The forms of control examined here include interviewer moves to nominate new topics in the discourse, to abandon previously nominated topics when they generate insufficient interviewee talk, to extend and alter the interviewer's immediately preceding utterance in order to shape the interviewee's next turn and to reformulate the propositional content of topics to which there has been an apparent underelaboration provided by the interviewee. All of these moves converge on the interviewers' compelling need to obtain a ratable sample of speech and form the core of strategies intended to advance the interview (Ross and Berwick, 1992). Table 2 provides the results for analysis of the control strategies.

Insert Table 2 here

None of these features of control reach our criterion of .01. There is still a trend consistent with the inter-rater differences observed in use of the accommodation strategies: The JSL interviewer offered a larger number of topics as focal points for the interview and was readier to pursue topics for which interviewee responses were not deemed elaborate enough for adequate evaluation of oral proficiency. These trends, when matched with the results for accommodation, suggest that the interviewers followed different paths to accomplishing their ratings. They also suggest that the interviewers may have developed disparate forms of evidence for allocating their interviewees' behavior to nominally equivalent levels of second language ability within the rating scale descriptions.

**IV Discussion: The discourse of accommodation and control**

Our analysis thus far has revealed several significant and reliable categorical differences in the use of accommodation, in addition to trends which suggest different approaches to the exercise of control during the interview. Beyond the interviewers' common interest in preserving a kind of generic question-and-answer format to guide elicitation of interviewee speech, the specific differences encountered in the Japanese and English interviews profile a distinct contrast between the interviewers' strategies in assisting

their interviewees to understand problematic material, find a way through a problem when it arises and follow an agenda that is intended to move the interviewee across major boundaries of the assessment procedure--from small-talk to level check, into and out of probes and into a wind-down. How are these differences elaborated pragmatically within the interview context? How do they function as contrasting communicative styles with reference points in two cultures?

To a large extent the two languages of the interviewers provide templates of opportunity for accommodation and control which permit, and may require, quite different treatment of problems arising during exchanges across turns. For example, an English-speaking interviewee may demonstrate difficulty with the frequent lack of explicit initial and secondary subject reference in Japanese; this may provide the Japanese interviewer an occasion to supply it in what would normally be inappropriate contexts of use. Similarly, Japanese post-position verbal inflections may signal solidarity or deference, or may indeed be altered to enforce the submissive position of an interviewee in ways which are simply unavailable to English-speaking interviewers. Cross-cultural pragmatic differences may also be evinced beyond the semantic properties of language structures and be conveyed through the ways the discourse is organized to achieve both the goals of the interview and the contingencies of topical development. The following excerpts illustrate some of what we think are

reliable differences in the interviewers' approaches to accommodating the interviewees and directing their talk.

Excerpt 1 depicts the preference of the Japanese interviewer (T) for an intense, closely managed, lexically and phrasally responsive accommodation to the interviewee. It contrasts rather prominently with the American interviewer's (P's) attempt in Excerpt 2 to provide the interviewee sufficient conversational resources to find a path out of lexical difficulty.

EXCERPT 1

01) T :Gakko de donna benkyo shitaka oshiete kudasai.:
Would you please tell me what kind of things you studied at school?
02) A > :Dona? [donna](2) Taitei Nihongo ...:
Wha- kind? (2) Basicaly Japanese
03) T :Nihongo, sore kara ...:
Japanese and ...
04) A > :Mmm, ryoko? Uh, ry- ryo-ri?:
Mmm, travel? Uh, co- cook-ing?
05) T :Ryori:
Cooking
06) A > :to shodo, to bigitsu [bijutsu]:
and tea ceremony and art
07) T :Bijutsu:
art
08) A /:bijutsu, to taiku:
/art and P.E.
09) T :Bijitsu wa donna koto oshiemashita?:
What sort of art were you taught?

EXCERPT 2

01) P And, uh, do you do aerobics or anything, or
02) anything else?
03) T > /I'm sorry
04) P Do you do, you do any other kind of sports
05) like aerobics or ...
06) T aerobics. Ah, yes. I have tried aerobics
07) before

In both cases, the interviewees' indications of lexical

uncertainty (>) were noticed and handled within a turn-relinquishing (question-and-response) framework. The American interviewer, however, attempts to clarify by suggesting an 'index' of categories that might offer assistance indirectly, including suppliance of or- questions and self-expansion; the more directive style of the Japanese interviewer relies heavily on other-correction and other-repetition in a kind of try-it-and-I'll-let-you-know-if-it's-right style of exchange. Although we did not code for other-correction, inspection of the transcripts indicates that the general preference for self-correction in conversation (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks, 1977) was overturned relatively frequently in the Japanese interviewer's rejoinders to his interviewee's responses, but that the American interviewer avoided other-correction in order to accommodate through negotiated exchange.

Interviewers' treatment of the interview as an instructional venue and use of accommodation in the form of an instructional tactic when presented with evidence of misunderstanding is a problem we noted in our earlier study (Ross and Berwick, 1992; see also Berwick, 1988). In the present case, both interviewers also served as teachers of their own language, so it came as no surprise to observe them both attempting to instruct when the opportunity presented itself. The Japanese language interviews, however, show a frequent and preferred use of accommodation to instruct,

especially when the problem involved evidence of lexical uncertainty, and included reliance on other-correction and definitions, as well as use of over-articulation and display questions. Excerpts 3 and 4 illustrate the use of other correction, Excerpt 5, over-articulation and Excerpt 6, display questions.

EXCERPT 3

```
01)  B >  :...taikitsu?:
          [?]
02)  T    :taiku, hai, taiku:
          physical education, OK, physical education
03)  B >  :...to biji-, biju-:
          and ar- ar-
04)  T    :Bijutsu, hai:
          Art, right
```

EXCERPT 4

```
01)  B >  :Tokoro wa takusan sakana:
           The place with lots of fish
02)  T     :Sakana, ah, "aquarium", ne, suizokukan, desu ne:
           Fish, oh, aquarium, right, you mean "aquarium"
```

EXCERPT 5

```
01)  B >  :kaimono [slurred] ni ikimashita:
          I went shopping
02)  T:   :Donna KAImono...:
          Shopping for what?
```

EXCERPT 6

```
01)  T >  :Ja desu, ne, computaa wa doko ni arimasu ka?:
          All right, >where is the computer?
02)  S    :Tsukue o, tsukue no ue ni arimasu:
          The desk, it's on top of the desk
03)  T >  :Soo desu ne. Kore wa nan desu ka?: [taps desk
          twice with pen or pencil]
          That's right.  What's this?
04)  S >  :Wakarimasen:
          I don't know
05)  T >  :Kore wa (1) purintaa desu ne. Computaa no
06)    >  no purintaa. Computaa no purintaa wa doko ni
07)       arimasuka?:
          This is a printer, isn't it.  A computer
```

printer. Where is the computer printer?

The didactic quality of these excerpts has been described elsewhere as a relatively efficient approach to conveying instructional goals (Berwick, 1988, 1993) in the sense that they avoid the apparently more roundabout negotiation of meaning evident in tasks which proceed via reciprocal information exchange. What makes the Japanese interviews unique as didactic transactions is the contingent nature of the instruction. That is, the instructionally focused sequences develop from within the discourse; they are not tied to any objectives which have been determined prior to the engagement of interviewer and interviewee. To this extent, the Japanese interviewer has effectively transformed accommodation to the interviewee into a means of exercising control from moment-to-moment without relying on the more marked tactics of control, including topic-initiation, topic-abandonment or reformulation of propositions produced by either the interviewee or the interviewer.

The oral interview can now be viewed as a complex process in which nominally conversational forms of accommodation have the potential to serve some of the major goals of oral assessment by a rapid, rather nimble leading of the interviewee through troubled waters. Conversational values can be re-worked, in effect, to cast them into the unaccustomed role of providing the level of asymmetry necessary to produce quick convergence on a topical focus

and controlled elicitation. This kind of *tutored* accommodation is not, as we have noted, ordinarily tolerated in conversational exchange--a potential source of unreliability in the OPI context--a compelling function of which is the *cooperative* weaving of common indexical threads across turns. The Japanese interviews demonstrate competent attention to both senses of accommodation, the English interviews largely to the latter.

Construction and reformulation of propositional nodes also distinguishes the two sets of interviews. In the OPI frame of reference, an interviewer's introduction and reformulation of periodic probes are crucial elements in determining the limits of an interviewee's oral proficiency. A good interviewer is supposed to be able to establish a rough idea of a candidate's level with reference to the descriptive rating scales and then attempt to push through this level to the point at which the candidate's speech begins to break down. Reaching this point is demonstrably traumatic for some people. It is still very much an open question, however, whether the effects of this conspicuous exercise of control over the interview vary systematically by culture, although we have speculated (Ross and Berwick, 1992) about the possibility that members of cultures which observe a norm of harmonious, uncontentious dialogue in face-to-face interaction (*cf.* Scollon and Scollon, 1981 re: "deference politeness", p. 175*f*) may be unprepared to either enforce or respond 'appropriately'

to the demands of the probe.

Our observations in the present case indicate that the Japanese interviewer exercised considerable control over the direction of the interviews and quality of responses by negotiating a series of information resources about the interviewee's recent experience and then committing the interviewee to dealing with an aspect or implication of the established resource. Functionally, this is equivalent to setting up a propositional node across several turns for further topical development. At no point did the Japanese interviewer launch a probe that appeared intended to destabilize an interviewee's performance at the current level. The American interviewer, on the other hand, attempted to organize probes which contained most of their rhetorical force in large monologue-like constructions and to reformulate these constructions during their delivery. It will not be especially useful here to examine the extent to which propositions formulated in this way succeeded in challenging the limits of the interviewees' current oral performance, except to note, as we have previously (Ross and Berwick, 1992), that the potential for confusion, for ambiguous interpretation, or threats to face may increase with the growing complexity of the proposition.

The following excerpts exemplify this contrast in communicative style.

EXCERPT 7

01) T :Eeeto, sore dewa desu ne. Eema Steveston de,
02) ee to, Nihongo no benkyo shiteimasu ne.:
Uh, all right then. You study Japanese at Steveston, right?
03) S [:?:]
04) T :Hai. Maishu, nankai Nihongo no benkyoshimasu
05) ka? (2) Maishu, nankai kurasu ga arimasuka?:
Yes. How many times a week do you study Japanese? (2)How many classes do you have per week?
06) S :(2) mm (2) uh (3) Getsuyobi kara (1) kinyobi
07) made (1) Nihongo (1) benkyo shimasu.:
(2) mm (2) uh (3) From Monday (1) to Friday (1) I study [1] Japanese.
08) T :Hai. Ja, isshukan, ikkai, nikkai, sankkai,
09) yonkkai, gokkai, nankai benkyo shimasu ka?:
All right, then. Once, twice, three times, four times, five times--how many times do you study in a week?
10) S :Uh, mainichi:
Uh, every day
11) T :Mainichi benkyo shimasu, ah soo desu ka
12) > Ee to, uh, S-san wa <u>naze</u> (1) Nihongo no benkyo
13) shimasu ka?:
Every day, I see. OK, uh, <u>why</u> (1) do you study Japanese?
14) S :(3) Moo ichi doo?:
Once more?
15) T > :Hai. S-san wa <u>naze</u> ema no Nihongo no benkyoshite
16) imasu ka?
OK. S-san, <u>why</u> are you studying the Japanese you told me about?
17) S :(5) Wakarimasen:
(5) I don't understand.
18) T :Hai. <u>Naze</u> to iyu no wa 'why' to iyu koto desu ne.:
OK. 'NAZE' means <u>why</u>, right?
19) S :Uh, Nihongo ga suki desu.:
Uh, I like Japanese.
20) T > :Naze ga suki desu ka?:
Why do you like it?
21) S :(10) Manga ga suki desu.:
(10) I like [Japanese] comics.
22) T :<u>manga</u>. Donna manga ga suki desu ka?:
Comics! What kind of comics do you like?
23) S :(3) Takusan:
Lots of them.
24) T :Takusan. Ah so desu ka.:
Lots. Oh, I see.

The probe which is formally initiated at line 15 ('<u>why</u> do you study Japanese?') is apparently intended to be comprehensible

from the outset. Beyond the careful, turn-based resolution of ancillary information leading to the question itself, the interviewee's trouble over the key word 'why' occasions a direct translation from Japanese to English and a temporary ratcheting up of the level of formal politeness. There are rough equivalents of this available to native English interviewers, including occasional code-switching, although in practice it would be difficult to avoid the rather heavy-handed, prosecutorial style that is conveyed when intense, turn-based propositional development in English becomes the norm for the interview. What works in Japanese with English-speaking interviewees apparently fails in English with Japanese-speaking interviewees.

The final excerpt points to an alternative approach to probing, to within-turn reformulation, preference for winding up to 'pitch a strike' to the interviewee and tolerance for awaiting the conclusion of an interviewee's turn that has the potential to develop into an extended monologue. The American interviewer expends no effort in responding contingently to the errors or mis-statements or other evidence of trouble, but focuses wholly on propositional content. It is an open question here whether the increasing weight of the proposition clarifies or obscures it for the interviewee.

EXCERPT 8

01) P And um (2) could you (2) maybe within the
02) last, uh (1)last year or so, uh (5) excuse
03) me, within the last year or so, uh, the land
04) prices in, uh, Japan have been a subject in

```
05)          the news, and, uh, the land prices, the price
06)          of land
07)   N            /um
08)   P      Uh could you tell me where, where in Japan
09)          is the most expensive to buy land?
10)   N      Uh, Tokyo
11)   P      Tokyo
12)   N      Uh (2) I, I hear Tokyo, uh, in Tokyo, uh, one,
13)          one Tsubo, uh, one (3) one, uh, one Tsubo is
14)          uu, three point three, uh, square meter
15)   P      mm hm
16)   N      uh, more than, uh, uh (2) several thousandu (3)
17)          several thousand million yen
 .
 .           [75 seconds]
 .
18)   P      In general, my question that I want to ask you
19)     >    in general is, uh, do you think it's fair that
20)          thee, uh, normal person cannot buy land, that
21)          the normal, average worker, uh, cannot buy
22)          enough land to build a house, or to, or
23)          actually buy a house?
24)   N      Uh
25)   P       /Because land pri-, because the price of land
26)           is so expensive, uh, >do you think it's fair, uh,
27)   N                      /mm
28)   P      or what do you think, uh, about the fact that
29)          thee average worker, the average person, uh,
30)   N                                                  /mm
31)   P      has a very difficult time, uh, affording land?
32)     >    Do you think that's bad?
```

**V Conclusion**

We conclude that communicative styles represented in the discourse of these interviews extend authority over the interviewee in very different ways, the Japanese style emphasizing authority through attention to form and a kind of 'instructional care-taking', the American style focusing on control through attention to content and reliance on the interviewee's willingness to observe a conversational style that 'engages the issues'. We suggest that if these interviewer differences are reliably distributed by culture,

as we think they may be, ratings which result from the interview process are likely to be based on disparate kinds of evidence for oral proficiency. More extensive sampling of contrastive interviews, matched according to proficiency ratings, should provide the kind of evidence necessary to test this hypothesis.

The analyses of the JSL and ESL interviews suggest also that the role of cultural background of the interviewer and the apparent differences in pragmatic strategies for dealing with interlocutor attempts to manage the interview may lead to dramatic differences in the interviewer's understanding of what sort of proficiency is being demonstrated. In addition to the observed pattern that JSL interviewees can be much less fluent and demonstrate less control over the morphosyntax of their second language than their ESL counterparts in achieving comparable ratings of proficiency, it appears that there may be an underlying assumption that the form of the response is critical in the JSL interviews--more so perhaps than the content of the response is in the ESL interviews. This pattern, if shown to be consistent with further sampling of cross-linguistic interviews, may suggest a degree of cultural/pragmatic relativity in the oral interview procedure that has not been explored to the extent necessary to match the broad attribution of face validity the OPI has thus far received.

The implication of systematic cultural variation in

interviewers' approaches to conducting the OPI procedure suggests, beyond further focused, empirical study of actual interviews, a practical reformulation of training procedures for raters. Explicit attention to cross-cultural factors may be a useful general emphasis during interviewer training, as might the possibility of developing particular strategies for the contingent conduct of the interview based on our knowledge of politeness systems deployed during gatekeeping interviews. For example, if a universal prototype for conducting an oral interview--such as deference politeness--is tenable and does produce reliable interviewer behavior across cultures, it may be desirable to instruct candidate interviewers on how to apply it during their interviews.

At a more fundamental level, however, it may be more appropriate to consider whether attempting to obviate cultural differences through recourse to a universal protocol is what we really want to undertake. One of the practical implications for assessment of research in cross-cultural pragmatics and communicative systems is that norms for intracultural verbal exchange in natural, non-test settings, are frequently extended to participants engaged in intercultural verbal exchange. If learners' developing pragmatic competence in a second language is part of the object of assessment in test settings, then it would seem odd to enforce an approach to assessment that fails to engage that competence.

Does this mean then that we are headed towards a kind of chaotic approach to oral proficiency testing in which local norms for the organization and enforcement of oral behavior overturn the relative certainty a single protocol provides? If rating scales are unsatisfactory now because of their arbitrary and open-ended characteristics, are we going to have to construct novel rating descriptions for all possible combinations of intercultural encounter between interviewers and interviewees? These problems may appear intractable given the often conflicting demands of validity, reliability and practicality which lead us to exact compromises in all of our approaches to assessment. The issue of validity in cross-cultural oral proficiency assessment therefore raises two additional questions for further examination, one empirical and the other axiological: How influential are cultural differences among interviewers and what do we think we should do about them?

*Notes*

[1]Although the OPI is one among several leading, systematic approaches to oral proficiency assessment used worldwide, we have noted (Ross and Berwick, 1992) that "perhaps the most carefully crafted and widely employed approach to oral proficiency assessment in what Valdman (1988), Bachman (1988) and others have termed the oral proficiency movement is the group of rating levels, descriptive rating guidelines and specific procedures developed over the years by the joint efforts of the U. S. Foreign Service Institute (FSI), American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the Educational Testing Service (ETS)....It will be convenient, although somewhat inexact, to refer to the class of oral proficiency interview conducted within the protocols and with reference to the guidelines as the Oral Proficiency Interview, or, simply, OPI." (See, below, American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1987; Educational Testing Service, 1982.)

[2]Interrater reliabilities were calculated using an analysis of variance procedure (Woods, Fletcher and Hughes, 1986). For the features of accommodation meeting the criterion alpha = .01, the repeated measures reliabilities were .838 (display question), .746 (over-articulation) and .859 (lexical simplification).

[3]The figures in Table 1 are not whole numbers because the features used for the analysis were averages of the two

independent tallies derived from the discourse analyses of the interviews.

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## Tables Used in the Study

Table 1 Features[3] of Accommodation: JSL and ESL

| | JSL | ESL | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Display Question | 19 | 2.5 | .008 |
| Clarification Requests | 20.5 | 16 | .464 |
| Or-Questions | 29.5 | 18 | .376 |
| Fronting | 19.5 | 11 | .180 |
| Grammatical Simp. | 12.5 | 4.5 | .075 |
| Slow-Down | 31.5 | 10 | .128 |
| Over-Articulation | 28 | 9 | .010 |
| Other-Expansion | 27.5 | 20.5 | .194 |
| Lexical Sima. | 29 | 8 | .008 |

Table 2 Features of Control: JSL and ESL

| | JSL | ESL | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Self-Repetition | 26 | 16 | .295 |
| Topic Nomination | 49 | 54 | .625 |
| Topic Abandonment | 35 | 25 | .038 |
| Self-Expansion | 46 | 53 | .687 |
| Propositional Reformulation | 42 | 18 | .023 |

## Appendix A

Features of Accommodation and Control Used in the Study

**Accommodation**

| Feature | Definition |
|---|---|
| Display question | The interviewer asks for information which is already known to the interviewer or which the interviewer believes the interviewee ought to know. |
| Comprehension check | The interviewer checks on the interviewee's current understanding of the topic or of the interviewee's immediately utterance. |
| Clarification request | The interviewer asks for a restatement of an immediately preceding utterance produced by the interviewee. |
| Or-question | The interviewer asks a question and immediately provides one or more options from which the interviewee may choose an answer. |
| Fronting | The interviewer provides one or more utterances to foreground a topic and set the stage for the interviewee's response. |
| Grammatical simplification | The interviewer modifies the syntactic or semantic structure of an utterance so as to facilitate comprehension. |
| Slowdown | The interviewer reduces the speed of an utterance. |
| Over-articulation | The interviewer exaggerates the pronunciation of words and phrases. |
| Other-expansion | The interviewer draws on the |

| | |
|---|---|
| | perceived meaning of the interviewee's utterance and elaborates on words or phrases within the utterance. |
| Lexical simplification | The interviewer chooses what is assumed to be a simpler form of a word or phrase which the interviewer believes the interviewee is unable to comprehend. |

**Control**

| Feature | Definition |
|---|---|
| Topic nomination | The interviewer proposes a new topic by foregrounding information not previously introduced in the discourse. This typically leads to a question which may be introduced by informative statements and which requires no link to previous topical development. |
| Topic abandonment | The interviewer unilaterally ends a current topic even though the interviewee may still show evidence of interest in further topic development. |
| Self-expansion | The interviewer extends and alters the content of the interviewer's immediately preceding utterance so as to accomplish interview objectives. |
| Propositional reformulation | The interviewer refocuses the interlocutor's attention on a previously nominated topic or issue which has not produced enough language to confirm a rating for the interviewee. |